

WHAT'S IN A NAME? – YA'AKOV AND/OR YISRAEL

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One of the most interesting and widespread biblical type scenes is that of bestowing a name. In fact, there are actually three main variations of this scene: (1) naming at birth, usually by one of the parents but occasionally by others: (2) the renaming of a person by God (i.e., Avram = Abraham) or by some other authority figure (i.e., Hoshea = Yehoshua); and (3) the creation of a nickname meant to accompany the person's main name (i.e., Gideon = Yeruba'al or Esau = Edom).

The first two categories are commonly understood to describe the essence of the person. Adam was able to define the core identity of the animals by naming them¹ and an official name that a person receives is likewise meant to define his core identity. This is, for example, what Esau tells us about the name Ya'akov, after he finds that the latter has taken away his blessing: *And he said: 'Is he not rightly named Ya'akov? For he has supplanted [which in Hebrew is related to the word Ya'akov] me these two times' (Gen. 27:36).*

In contrast, when a biblical figure receives a nickname, it simply describes a single event or characteristic and, as such, doesn't attempt to define the essence of who (or what) is named. Hence, it follows that although an essential name and a nickname can coexist, two essential names cannot.

In most instances, these categories remain clear and distinct, but that is not always the case. The most significant blurring of this classification occurs in the case of Ya'akov-Yisrael. In that narrative, while Ya'akov appears to be granted a new name meant to *supplant* the old, it actually ends up being the *addition* of another name – though in this case one difficult to construe as a nickname. Thus, although Ya'akov is told that his name will now be Yisrael, the Torah continues to use the old name alongside the new. As pointed out by the Talmud (TB *Berachot* 13a), it is not just a blurring of categories that is at stake here. The name change here is of a stronger form, similar to that of Abraham, wherein the biblical text seems to *prohibit* any further use of the name Ya'akov: *And God said unto him: 'Thy name is Ya'akov: thy name shall*
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not be called any more Ya'akov, but Yisrael shall be thy name'; and He called his name Yisrael (Gen. 35:10).

In fact, this issue is hard to miss – for by occasionally using both names in very close proximity, the Torah seems to be making sure that we notice the coexistence of Ya'akov's old name alongside his new one. This anomaly is well worth our attention.

Let us first look at the Talmud's answer to the question it raises about the apparent prohibition in the Bible to use the name Ya'akov once the patriarch's name was changed to Yisrael: "There is a difference in his case, because Scripture restored [the name Ya'akov] to him, as it is written (Gen. 36:2): *And God spoke unto Yisrael in the visions of the night, and said, 'Ya'akov, Ya'akov'*" (TB *Berakhot* 13a).

In essence, the Talmud doesn't really answer the question that it poses. Rather, it appeals to authority by saying that, in the case of Ya'akov, the Torah itself reverts to the older name – and we must therefore assume that it is acceptable. Both this line of reasoning as well as the Talmud's elaboration, that the new name wasn't meant to replace the old one, appear to be *ex post facto* explanations. In other words, had we only read the narrative up to Ya'akov's name change, it is very unlikely that we would have had any reason to expect the name Ya'akov to ever reappear. However, once we continue to see the name Ya'akov used along with the newer one, Yisrael, we have no choice but to revise our understanding of the name change.

Even more fundamentally, the Talmud doesn't explain *why* the use of the name Ya'akov is acceptable in view of the Torah's earlier proscription of the name. Thus, on some level, all that the Talmud seems to do is restate the facts without giving us any insight into how it is that these two essential names can coexist in one person.

Several commentators explore this issue further and, in one form or another, offer the following explanation: The Torah continues to use the name Ya'akov, even after his name has been changed, when the situation at hand is characterized by the vulnerability of his youth as long as he was only Ya'akov. At that point, his apparently sheltered life in his parents' home resulted in his inability to confront Esau head on, and to rely instead on roundabout ways of trying to wrest the dominant role from his brother. Thus, for example, when he is afraid to send Benjamin to Egypt (Gen. 42:4), he is fit-

tingly referred to as Ya'akov. He is also Ya'akov in his interview with Pharaoh, when he complains of a hard life (Gen. 47:7-10). In contrast, the name Yisrael is reserved for his bolder actions or thoughts, which are more in line with how the mysterious wrestler described the reason for the name Yisrael: '*For thou hast striven with God and with men, and hast prevailed*' (Gen. 32:29).²

An example of this would be when, having just heard (as Ya'akov) that Joseph is alive, he turns into Yisrael and decides to take bold action and go with his family to Egypt (Gen. 45:28). Likewise, in most of the blessings he gives to his children and grandchildren, he is the bold Yisrael. Although it doesn't work easily in every situation (for example, in Genesis 43:6, when it is Yisrael who complains that his sons told Pharaoh about Benjamin, and immediately afterwards in 43:8, when it is again Yisrael who is rebuked by his son Judah), the distinction works well, broadly speaking, and has a fair amount of explanatory power. Nonetheless, it doesn't answer our original question as to how the Torah can violate its own admonition that Ya'akov's new name was to *replace* the older one.

The Talmud's question may perhaps be answered by rephrasing it in line with our introduction: Given our understanding of a name's function as a description of a person's essence, the prohibition is really a tautology: it is a logical proposition that since A (the essence described by the first name) is different to B (the essence described by the new name), A cannot describe B. Hence, if I receive a new name, it is axiomatic that I cannot keep my old name. To put it differently, if a name is meant to represent an identity, a person is entitled to only one – unless, of course, a person can have more than one identity.

In actual fact, there is ample evidence to suggest that the existence of a double identity here is precisely what the Torah wants us to recognize. The careful reader will notice a constant and unique duality that exemplifies the life of Ya'akov and thereby makes him exceptional. His two (sets of) wives are only the beginning – if perhaps the most important indicator – of his double personality. (To deny the uniqueness of this situation by comparing him in this regard to Abraham is not in order, since in that case there is a clear hierarchy that distinguishes between Sarah and the others.) The duality denoted by his very different wives is in turn institutionalized through the rival-

ry for leadership among their sons, primarily represented by Judah and his descendants on the one hand and Joseph and his descendants on the other. In the end, this rivalry and the different approaches represented by the two parts of Ya'akov-Yisrael may have been a very significant factor leading to, and reinforcing, the division of the Jewish nation into the northern (Ephraim) and the southern (Judah) kingdoms.

Similarly, Ya'akov's usurping of his twin Esau's birthright and blessing can represent an assumption of Esau's personality alongside his own. In this sense, the rabbinic tradition that the wrestler whom Ya'akov subdues is actually Esau's guardian angel³ fits in well. Ya'akov wants confirmation of his status as the true firstborn. This confirmation is best represented by his older brother's guardian angel: so long as Esau still has his own angel, Ya'akov has not completely taken on Esau's essence. Thus, the struggle at the Jabbok embodies the notion that, having assumed Esau's role as the firstborn, he should now subdue Esau's guardian angel in order to seek his protection (alongside that of his own original guardian angel).

Finally, there is a cluster of clues to this duality specifically around the narratives of Ya'akov receiving his new name (which, we might by now have predicted, occurs twice). The story is significantly prefaced by his visit to *Maḥanayim* – the *double* camp (Gen. 32:3), and bracketed by his *two* visits to Bet El (Gen. 28 and 35). Moreover, Ya'akov's preparation for his meeting with Esau includes the sending of *two* delegations and the division of his camp into *two* parts, so that if one is destroyed, the other will survive.⁴ The survival of one half is only conceivable if it is not wholly dependent on the other half – which should not be taken for granted, in view of the later frequent comparison of a nation to one body requiring all of its parts.

The idea that the Torah is specifically trying to make us aware of Ya'akov's unusual double personality also helps us understand some of the strange juxtapositions of the two names, such as when he strengthens himself to bless Joseph's children (Gen. 48:2-3). Although he is by now Yisrael, the text tells us that he is also still Ya'akov even when he acts like the former. The same occurs in reverse when Ya'akov offers his parting words to Simeon and Levi, telling them that his dislike of their militancy is not only true of Ya'akov but also of Yisrael (Gen. 49:7). Thus, although one personality will dominate at any given time, the other personality is always with him still.

Nor does the juxtaposition end with the Torah. It is to be found later in the Bible, especially in the Psalms (for example, 147:19), which make repeated side-by-side use of the two names. In those cases, the text is referring to his progeny, showing that this duality did not end with the death of Ya'akov-Yisrael, but was in fact also transmitted to his descendants.

It is hard to know whether the Talmud's answer to the question about the name Ya'akov reemerging can be read in line with our thinking. But were we to answer the question more directly, we would say that the prohibition/tautology of having more than one essential name is only given to the emerging Yisrael personality. This new personality is defined by the name Yisrael and so obviously cannot be called Ya'akov, because that name does not describe the essence of the new personality. Nonetheless, if Ya'akov chooses to retain the personality of his youth – something unprecedented – then obviously he would also keep that name as well. The prohibition only refers to the personality; our generally correct assumption is that since an individual has only one personality, he only has one name. In our case, however, the assumption breaks down: since Ya'akov-Yisrael has two side-by-side personalities, he can also be described by two coexisting names.

Though beyond the scope of this article, one might suggest that if Ya'akov represents the more sheltered and passive approach to life embodied by his childhood, and if Yisrael represents the bolder, more confrontational approach embodied by his later years, then the reason for Ya'akov's split personality may be rooted in his need to maintain the legacy of both his father and his grandfather – echoed in his appeal to *the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac* (Gen. 32:10). From this perspective, while Ya'akov's youth resembles that of his passive and isolated Israel-constrained father,⁵ his adult life resembles the trials and tribulations of Abraham among the nations. In this sense, Abraham's outgoing personality is likewise what Ya'akov took from his brother Esau – a personality which, as some have suggested, Isaac had hoped that Esau rather than Ya'akov would embody.⁶ For Ya'akov to successfully perpetuate their vastly different legacies would likely require taking on a dual personality, even during the latter period of his life.

Whether or not we are correct regarding the last contention, it is clear that we have here a good example of a deviation from an expected biblical type scene, one meant to elicit a more nuanced understanding of the case at hand.

In the case of Ya'akov-Yisrael, this curious deviation is supplemented by many other clues to teach us that, for whatever reason, Ya'akov was fated to bequeath a dual legacy to his descendants, something for which he became uniquely (or shall we say dually) suited.

NOTES

1. Rooted in *Bereshit Rabbah* 17:4, see R. Yehudah Halevi's *Sefer ha-Kuzari* 4:25:8, as well as Bekhor Shor, Rabbenu Bahya ben Asher, Sforno, *Torat Moshe* (Alshekh), S. R. Hirsch et al. on Genesis 2:19. See also, however, S. D. Luzzato, who follows Johannes Clericus (1657-1736) in understanding the naming as solely denoting man's dominion over the creatures and not his understanding of their essence, a notion that Rashi also endorses in a different context (II Chronicles 36:4).
2. Ramban on Genesis 46:2, Bahya on 45:28 and S. R. Hirsch on 45:27. See also Herbert Block, "Distinguishing Jacob and Israel," *JBQ* 34:3 (July-September 2006).
3. *Bereshit Rabbah* 77:3.
4. See Herbert Marks, "Biblical Naming and Poetic Etymology," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114:1 (Spring 1995) pp. 34-42 (although he himself is not sympathetic to the notion that names are meant to represent the essence of Biblical characters); and Stephen A. Geller, "The Struggle at the Jabbok: The Uses of Enigma in a Biblical Narrative," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 14 (1982) pp. 52, 55-6.
5. See Chapter 4 of my *Redeeming Relevance in the Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2006).
6. See Sforno on Genesis 27:29 as well as R. Adin Steinsaltz's essay on Isaac in *Biblical Images* (New York: Basic Books, 1984) pp. 31-40.